

**FROM ESPINOSA'S STRAWBERRY VINES TO  
LINDHEIMER'S FAN-SHAPED AGAVES WITH FORTY-FOOT  
STEMS: THE PITFALLS OF TAKING TRANSLATIONS OF  
EARLY DESCRIPTIONS AT FACE VALUE**

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Spanish explorers seem to have covered about every inch of what is now Texas, and wherever they went they wrote descriptions of the landscape, flora and fauna. In the 1930s the Texas Catholic Historical Society translated into English these handwritten journals, now in the archives in Mexico City. But when we consider that the priests translating these journals did not necessarily have any special interest in botany or zoology, we should realize that at times it may be necessary to look behind the translations to see what the Spanish explorers really wrote.

In 1716 Fray Isidro Felix de Espinosa, a Mexican priest accompanying a Spanish expedition, wrote in his diary a description of the flora he saw at San Antonio Springs, now Brackenridge Park, in San Antonio. Any naturalist familiar with Brackenridge Park who reads the commonly used translation of this passage will be startled to learn that Espinosa purportedly saw "very tall cactus," and "strawberry vines." These references caused one botanist friend of mine to throw away the baby with the bath water, maintaining that Espinosa was seeing things and his description was therefore of no value. But inspection of the handwritten diary in Spanish, on microfilm at the Latin American Collection of the University of Texas Library, Austin, reveals that Espinosa recorded no such botanical wonders. He wrote of seeing *nogales altisimos* (very tall pecan trees), not *nopales altisimos* (very tall cactus). Tall pecan trees are an expected part of the San Antonio Springs flora, and can be seen there today. Very tall cactus, of course, is not. Evidently the translator had read the "g" of *nogales* as a

"p," thus converting the pecan trees into cactus. This was a careless mistake. The handwriting is clear; one can easily distinguish the writer's "g"s and "p"s by comparing them to the "g"s and "p"s of other words in the manuscript. The "g" of *nogales* is clearly identical with the "g" of *agua*, and plainly differs from the "p" of *capaz*.

As for the strawberry vines, a glance at the diary entry reveals that the word Espinosa actually wrote was *madroños*, or what we call madrones, trees that were possibly growing there in 1716. So how did the translator come up with "strawberry vines?" Consulting my Velázquez Spanish/English dictionary, I see that *madroño* is translated as "madrone," or as "strawberry tree," an expression used by the English to refer to a species of madrone that occurs in Spain. For whatever reason the translator, who likely knew nothing of madrones, chose "strawberry tree" instead of "madrone" to translate *madroños*, then, for whatever reason, converted "trees" to "vines."

In this same passage, the journal entry describing San Antonio Springs, Espinosa writes of seeing *palmitos legítimos*, which was translated as "genuine fan palms." Since I study native Texas palms and their distribution, and the translation is vague, I had to determine exactly what Espinosa meant by *palmitos legítimos*. Many would assume that *palmitos* obviously meant (dwarf) "palmettoes" (*Sabal minor*), a common enough plant in Texas, and would have let it go at that. But an examination of the wild plants in Brackenridge Park, which still retains some bottomland forest, reveals no dwarf palmetto, nor have I ever seen any in all San Antonio (although they do occur in the Hill Country north of San Antonio). You do see many young palms escaping cultivation in San Antonio, but the ones I've seen have all been *Sabal mexicana*, not *Sabal minor*. And why would Espinosa consider the humble *Sabal minor* palms to be the ones that had the distinction of being *legítimos*?

The explanation goes back to Spain, where there is a species of dwarf fan palm called *palmito* (*Chamaerops humilis*), and this palm has an edible heart, also called *palmito*. When the Spanish explorers came to the New World they continued to call heart-of-palm *palmito*,

and also called any kind of palm, tall or dwarf, they encountered that had an edible heart *palmito*. And the usage continues. According to Mexican botanist Ignacio Piña Lujan, in an article titled "*El Palmito*" (in *Cactaceas y Suculentas Mexicanas* 17: 84-92), *palmito* is the common name for *Sabal mexicana* (which has an edible heart) in the Huasteca region of northeastern Mexico. While Espinosa was not from the Huasteca region, he was from what is now the Mexican state of Querétaro, which apparently has no *S. mexicana*, but borders on the Huasteca region. With that background, his travels northward, and his evident interest in plants, he was probably familiar with *palmitos*, and recognized them when he saw them at San Antonio Springs. Why *legítimos*? Words such as *palma* and *palmito* are used loosely in Spanish to mean yuccas as well as palms. I suspect Espinosa wanted his readers to know that he was seeing not yuccas but the real thing, a palm he already knew well. And if you go to San Antonio Springs (Brackenridge Park) today you will see no dwarf palmetto, but you will see *Sabal mexicana*, both planted along roads, and coming up wild in the woods, where the young palms are easily mistaken for dwarf palmetto. Today in Olmos Park, just upstream from Brackenridge Park, there is a small grove of *S. mexicana* hidden in the woods.

*S. mexicana* is Texas' only other native palm species (besides *S. minor*), and only tree-size native palm species. For decades botanists believed *S. mexicana* was native no farther north than the Lower Rio Grande Valley, until a remnant natural population was discovered near Victoria in 1989. Carefully interpreted, the Espinosa diary constitutes evidence as to how far inland the range of this palm extended--until the north-of-the-LRGV population was almost totally removed, for use of the trunks as pilings for wharves, and for landscaping.

While Ferdinand Lindheimer was botanizing in Texas in the 1840s he corresponded with George Engelmann, at the Missouri Botanical Garden. These letters were handwritten in German, in an archaic script. Nevertheless the late Minetta Goyne undertook to translate these letters, now in the possession of the Missouri Botanical Garden. In 1991 she published her translation in a book titled *A Life among the Texas Flora: Ferdinand Lindheimer's letters to George*

*Engelmann*. As Goyne explains, deciphering Lindheimer's handwriting was the most difficult part of the task.

According to Goyne's translation, in a letter dated 22 Jan. 1845, from "Camp on the Agua Dulce," which Lindheimer located as "7 miles from Port Lavaca on the West Matagorda Bay," Lindheimer wrote:

I collected seeds of the fanshaped agave ["*Facherpulke*"] with stem that is often 20' to 40' high.

Coming upon this sentence in Goyne's book, while reading it cover to cover looking for references to palm trees, I immediately sensed that the reference was to palms, not to a kind of agave one can scarcely imagine. Also I was helped by the fact that a wild population of *Sabal mexicana* had been discovered on Garcitas Creek, 15 miles north of Port Lavaca, and that one of these *S. mexicana*, that had fallen, had a trunk that measured 37 feet.

But how did Goyne get "fanshaped agave?" When Lindheimer scrawled the German word *palme* he left a gap at the top of the "a," making it look like a "u," and made the first loop of the "m" much higher than the second loop, so that Goyne interpreted the "m" as a "k." This produced the word *pulke*, which she interpreted as a German spelling of the Spanish word *pulque*, meaning a Mexican alcoholic beverage made from the juice of agaves. From this she reasoned that Lindheimer, who had lived in Mexico and was presumably familiar with *pulque*, and who, she knew from his writings, liked to play with words, had used the word *pulke* to mean agave.

But when I called Goyne, telling her about the Garcitas Creek palms, and asking her to take another look at the sentence, she explained that she had had no idea that palm trees had ever occurred in that area, and quickly agreed that the correct interpretation of the word in question was *Facherpalme* ("fan palm") rather than the very far fetched *Facherpulke*, translated as "fanshaped agave."

Because of his misreading of *nogales* "pecan trees" as *nopales* "cactus," the translator of Espinosa's diary was careless. But I make no such accusation of Goyne, who was doing the best she could with an extremely difficult manuscript, and with no reason to suspect that wild palm trees, with trunks up to 40 feet, had ever occurred near Port Lavaca. I only hope that no botanist, reading of the "fanshaped agave," has rejected her book as unworthy of attention.